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Taking Discipleship Learning Seriously: Setting Priorities for the Rural Church

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**Abstract**

This study draws on insights from empirical theology, sociological analysis and the Gospel of Mark to argue that discipleship learning deserves a high priority in the agenda of the rural church. The implications of placing discipleship high on the agenda of the rural church are illustrated by reference to the strategy and vision statement of the Diocese of Bangor (Learning Church) and to the BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry offered by Glyndŵr University in association with the St Mary's and St Giles' Centre.

*Keywords:* discipleship, education, ministry, formation, learning, rural church.

### Looking back

When I wrote my analysis of the rural church thirty years ago in *Rural Anglicanism* (Francis, 1985), a judiciously placed question mark in the subtitle was intended to point to what I saw to be urgent questions about the future viability of structures that at that time I was supporting as a house-for-duty priest. The subtitle read: *A future for young Christians?* My empirically-grounded analysis was based on three sources of data. First, I drew together the available published statistics to map trends over a thirty year period across electoral rolls, Easter and Christmas communicants, stipendiary clergy, baptisms and confirmations. The documented trend of the graphs told its own story. Second, I invited all serving clergy with responsibility for parishes to complete a detailed questionnaire. The 92% response rate surprised me. Third, I employed participant observers to profile one rural deanery in depth. Their observations opened my eyes. Even back in the early 1980s, the research drew attention to the developing picture of a rapidly changing landscape affecting pastoral care and liturgical provision.

Robert Runcie, then Archbishop of Canterbury, offered an encouraging evaluation of this relatively innovative approach to rural theology that drew on empirical research techniques. He described it as a ‘timely and devastating study’ which is ‘scrupulously researched ... and buttressed by vivid case studies as well as statistics’. Not all bishops, however, felt quite so positive about this style of empirical investigation. Bishop Peter Nott (Taunton) described it as ‘a doom-laden document’ which did ‘a great deal of harm to the morale of the country church’. Bishop Eric Wild (Dorchester) wrote that ‘this is not only an irritating book, it is a bad and ignorant book’.

Since the early 1980s, the future of the rural church has been further clarified. New energy was generated by the report of the Archbishops’ Commission on Rural Areas (1990), *Faith in the Countryside*. Rural dioceses have grappled with the major challenges of

managing buildings, restructuring benefices, paying clergy, and providing pastoral care and liturgical provision. Many would now see the rural church as being in a leaner but stronger position than thirty years ago and more able to embrace the future with confidence.

It is against this background of confidence in the future that it is both reasonable and possible to raise fundamental theological questions about the way in which the rural church may identify the foundations on which to build the future strategy. There are a number of crucial practical issues that need attention. Old buildings need to be maintained, adapted or discarded. New moneys have to be raised or budgets have to be pruned. Stipendiary ministry has to be paid, or self-supporting ministry has to be further expanded. Services have to be cut back, or new ways found to equip worship leadership. The old Anglican vision of parish-based pastoral care has to be adequately resourced or reconsidered. The social gospel needs implementing, or quietly ignoring. It is very clear that there are a number of practical issues that need constant attention, but how are priorities to be negotiated? Where is the starting point?

### **Looking to the Sower**

For empirical theology, the starting point always involves reflecting on and applying the dominical invitation to go and observe the sower, and this dominical invitation operates at two levels. At the first level, the invitation is to take experience seriously, to take evidence seriously, to take context seriously. When Jesus came proclaiming the Reign of God, people asked him to tell them more about that Reign. Invariably Jesus' reply was to engage his questioners in active learning. He invited them to go and to see what is happening.

The invitation to observe the sower may be most accessible to those of us engaged in rural ministry. The Parable of the Sower tells us that the quality of the soil is pretty important and we need to get to know the soil. My own research tradition as a social scientist is most concerned about understanding the soil with which the rural church currently works. I wish to

provide a model that distinguishes between three kinds of soil and to argue that the priorities we emphasise within the rural church reflect our assumptions about which of these three kinds of soils is uppermost.

The first kind of soil comprises those people whose lives have been infused and transformed by the Christian narrative. These are the people who have grown up with the story of Jesus, and with the doctrines and liturgy of the church shaping their lives. These are the people whose hearts, minds and souls have been formed in Christ. The rural church that is rich in such people can draw boldly on their resources to shape liturgical provision, to extend pastoral care, to promote the social gospel, and to pay the parish share. We would style these people the ‘good soil’ that brings forth fruit thirty-fold, sixty-fold and a hundred-fold. My assessment, however, is that such people are not as plentiful as we would like and that such people are aging and not being replaced by a younger generation quickly enough to sustain the future.

The second kind of soil comprises those people who have been brought up in a Christian culture, who have heard the Christian narrative, who have been exposed to the great Christian doctrines and who have experienced the liturgy of the church, but whose lives have not been transformed by the experience. These are the people who have consciously turned their backs on the Christian narrative and actively opted for a secular worldview. In the 1970s when I began my research into the variety of soils, this was an interesting group of people who were actively hostile to or actively indifferent to the gospel message. These were not the people who would welcome an invitation to the harvest festival. We could style these people as those who ‘fell among thorns’. My assessment, however, is that such people are not as plentiful as they were. The last few generations have not been sufficiently exposed to the Christian narrative to rebel against it.

The third kind of soil comprises those people who have grown up in a post-Christian culture, who have never lived in a world that was given its primary identity by the Christian narrative. These are people who have never bought into a worldview given its shape by the Christian doctrines of creation, fall and redemption, and who do not feel instinctively at home in a liturgical context shaped by such assumptions. These are people who are not hostile to the Christian gospel, just profoundly ignorant about it. We could style these people as those who ‘fell on rocky soil’ and who simply lacked sufficient moisture and adequate nutrients for the grain of faith to germinate. My assessment is that such people offer the fruitful soil on which the rural church may build if only there were enough energy and enough insight to begin to move away the rocks. It is precisely at this point that the second level of the invitation to observe the sower comes into play.

The Parable of the Sower can be read at many levels. The first level commits empirical theologians to the science of careful observation and to the skill of analysis in order to recognise the context within which the Church operates. The second level, however, commits empirical theologians to raising their eyes from the local fields to grasp the vision of the master sower himself. Go now to observe how the Gospels portray Jesus going about his task of displaying and encouraging reflection on the Reign of God.

### **Looking to Mark’s Gospel**

The point of my analysis is that the environment in which Jesus was operating was not dissimilar from the environment in which the rural church may be operating today. The people who responded to Jesus’ invitation were not people who had been part of the Christian narrative all their lives (the good soil), or people who had rejected the Christian narrative on the grounds of previous exposure to it (the soil covered with thorns), but people who were becoming part of the narrative for the very first time (the rocky soil). It is Jesus’ strategy for engaging with such people that may reward further theological reflection.

According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus begins by prioritising the call to discipleship, and at face value this seems a very strange place to start. Mark's Gospel begins so very abruptly after the intriguing prologue (1: 1-13) and the intriguing announcement that, following John's arrest, Jesus came proclaiming the Reign of God (1: 14-19). Then Jesus began his ministry not by teaching about the Reign of God through words, not by displaying the Reign of God through actions, but by calling into discipleship his first four followers to experience, to reflect on and to bear witness to the Reign of God: Simon Peter and his brother Andrew (1:16-18), and the brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee (1: 19-20). Only after the School of Discipleship has been formed around these four fishermen, did Jesus' ministry begin to take shape and begin to make sense.

Immediately after their call, Jesus took these four disciples with him into the synagogue in Capernaum (1: 21-28). Clearly worship and the proclamation of scripture are core activities in the shaping of discipleship. In the synagogue Jesus displayed what life is like when God reigns: the possessed man is healed. Clearly experience of God's reign is core to shaping disciples.

From the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus followed Simon Peter to his home (1: 29-31). There again Jesus displayed what life is like when God reigns, as Simon Peter's mother-in-law was healed of her fever and Jesus benefited from hospitality at her restored hands. Clearly God reigns as much in the private home as in the public synagogue; and discipleship is being shaped in the domestic sphere as much as in the religious sphere.

According to the Marcan model, those called into the School of Discipleship stood alongside Jesus and witnessed his actions before they listened to his teaching. When they do ask for teaching, the disciples observe five distinctive characteristics of Jesus' approach.

First, the request for Jesus to teach about the Reign of God was met by an invitation to go to find out for themselves (4: 1-9). They were sent out to watch the sower, to take careful



note of the patterns they observed and to wrestle with the task of making sense of their observations. The dominical pattern of education for discipleship clearly employs a path of active learning.

Second, after Jesus had given his disciples the opportunity to observe how he goes about things, after Jesus had given his disciples the opportunity to observe how he teaches about things, he sent them out in pairs to put their learning into practice (6: 7-13). The dominical pattern of education for discipleship clearly trusts a path of experiential learning.

Third, after Jesus had allowed his disciples to run the gauntlet of rejection as much as of welcome on their practical placement among the towns and villages, he called them away to a quiet place to rest and to reflect (6: 30-33). The dominical pattern of education for discipleship clearly involves commitment to reflective practice.

Fourth, as the disciples crossed the water to find a quiet place in which to continue their reflection, they found themselves at the heart of a vibrant eucharistic community where Jesus took bread, gave thanks over the bread, broke bread, and involved the disciples in sharing bread with the crowd (6: 34-44). The dominical pattern of education for discipleship clearly involves leadership within the eucharistic community.

Fifth, as the disciples settled into the eucharistic community it is here, at the heart of their fellowship, that they recognised and responded to the diaconal ministry. It is here that they found food for the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, comforted the sorrowful, supported the dying, and proclaimed release to the captives. The dominical pattern of education for discipleship clearly involves the ministry of pastoral care and engagement for social justice.

### **Prioritising discipleship**

This reading of Mark's Gospel as placing the call to discipleship at the heart of Jesus' ministry is consistent with a reading of the closing verses of Matthew's Gospel that notes

Jesus' parting commission to his followers to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28: 19-20). It is also consistent with a growing awareness within the wider church of the need to value and to resource the call to discipleship.

From the mid-1980s, a series of reports from the Church of England moved the notion of discipleship closer to the centre of attention, including: *All are called: Towards a theology of the laity* (Church of England, 1985) that speaks of equipping lay people for 'effective discipleship'; *Called to be adult disciples* (Church of England, 1987) that elevated the notion of discipleship into the title; and *Called to new life: The world of lay discipleship* (Church of England, 1999). Building on these foundations, the report on formation for ministry within a learning church, *Shaping the future* (Church of England, 2006), gave consideration both to defining the term discipleship and to considering ways in which Education for Discipleship (EDF) could be encouraged within academically accredited frameworks.

In *Shaping the future*, the term discipleship is employed:

to describe the whole life-response of Christians to Jesus Christ. Everything a Christian believes and does is potentially an aspect of discipleship: the goal of discipleship is to grow ever more Christ-like in every aspect of life. (Church of England, 2006, p. 4)

The report is clear that it would be a mistake to conceptualise discipleship as an access level on the pathway to ministry, or to confuse discipleship with 'discipling' in the sense of emphasising conformity or obedience. A real strength of *Shaping the future* is the way in which it proceeds to offer five concrete examples of how an academically accredited programme of Education for Discipleship may look in practice, although 'none of the examples fully describe any existing programme, and some elements of imagination have been introduced' (p. 20). In offering these five concrete examples, the report emphasises that

such programmes need to demonstrate appropriate academic rigour at the relevant level through meeting the following conditions (p. 20):

- appropriate criteria are applied in assessment of submitted work;
- participants are required to engage with current issues and debate at an appropriate level;
- facilitators are theologically and educationally competent;
- ongoing development of the programme is undertaken in response to staff and student feedback.

As far as I am aware, none of the five example programmes outlined in *Shaping the future* has been subsequently implemented within an academically accredited context. Moreover, there is no reference to academic accreditation in the review of diocesan strategies to ‘mainstream discipleship’ delivered by Cox (2012) to the Board of Education under the title *Getting discipleship into the lifeblood*.

In his paper on ‘Discipleship and vocation’, James Francis (2009) draws on the Living Theology Today programme offered in Durham to illustrate ‘the human vocation to learn’ as the core meaning of discipleship. This non-academically accredited year-long study programme was designed with two aims: to aid growth in Christian understanding and to strengthen confidence in discipleship; and to offer access to theological study for those exploring authorised ministries.

While studies like Church of England (2006) and J. Francis (2009) advocate the potential for taking discipleship learning seriously, Neil (2010) makes clear both the urgency for and the lack of current provision for appropriately structured programmes in lay adult theological education. Based on the findings from an in-depth study of churchgoers in five rural churches in Wales, Neil concluded that churchgoers deprived of adequate theological

education remain Sunday-school Christians with under-developed theological knowledge. He argues that:

churchgoers should be entitled to a level of theological education which includes progression, that churchgoers should be provided with a structure, a vocabulary and a grammar for theological discourses, and that a forum should be made available in which the Church can foster the development of theological competence. (p. 115)

### **Looking to the Diocese of Bangor**

The Diocese of Bangor is one of the most rural dioceses in England and Wales, embracing Snowdonia and the most mountainous areas of Wales. Around the coast, the Diocese has numerous small communities, seaside resorts and ports. Inland there are small post-industrial communities (following the collapse of slate mining) and agricultural communities where unemployment is high. Most of the agriculture is on marginal land, the population is small and scattered, and sheep outnumber people. Culturally there are huge differences between seaside resorts, mountain villages and the more fertile areas of mid-Wales. By 2012 these vast tracts of rural Wales were being served by 44 stipendiary clergy.

The Diocese of Bangor has taken seriously the changing religious landscape of Wales, and recognised the need to invest in Christian learning. Although the 2001 Government census found that 72% of the population identified as Christian (see Francis, 2003; Weller, 2004; Sherif, 2011), a number of commentators seriously questioned the *religious* significance of these data (see Voas & Bruce, 2004). Independent counts of church attendance revealed that less than 10% of the population were attending church on a Sunday (Brierley, 2008). An independent survey of religious belief among 13- to 15-year-old students in Wales found that 73% were either atheists or agnostics (Francis, ap Siôn, & Penny, 2014). It is trends of this nature, steadily growing since the 1960s, that have encouraged some commentators to speak of *The Death of Christian Britain* (Brown, 2001).

The Diocese of Bangor has taken seriously the notion of discipleship and designed a diocesan strategy that gives priority to the dominical call for discipleship learning. The strategy has been shaped in a vision statement under the title *Learning Church*. The Learning Church is a place in which discipleship is nurtured, in which nurtured discipleship gives rise to mature vocations to recognised ministries, and in which education, learning and formation for recognised ministries grows alongside education, learning and formation for discipleship.

Theologically, the diocesan strategy is rooted in Jesus' great commission in Matthew 28: 19-20. In this sense, the purpose and mission of the church is conceptualised as calling people into and as equipping them for discipleship. A church that places the call to discipleship at the heart of its identity has to address a series of subsequent questions about the precise nature of this mission. In its strategy document the Diocese addresses nine specific characteristics of its identity as a Learning Church.

In the Diocese of Bangor, the Learning Church takes *Christian theology* seriously, theology that is built on scripture, grounded in tradition, and shaped by reason. The Learning Church takes *Anglican heritage* seriously, valuing episcopal identity, parochial structure, and the centrality of the Cathedral. The Learning Church is a *rooted church* embedded in the cultures and languages of Wales, shaped by the rural context, and committed to ecumenical partnership. The Learning Church is a *serving church* deploying its resources for the benefit of others and through engagement with secular structures. The Learning Church is an *inclusive church* serving the needs of all people irrespective of race and culture, religion and faith, sex and age. The Learning Church is a *prophetic church* committed to nurturing high standards in worship, in service and mission, in ministry, in teaching and preaching, and in administration and finance.

In its vision of the *Learning Church*, the Diocese of Bangor has taken very seriously the place of theological learning, theological reflection and personal, spiritual and

professional formation in the call to discipleship. At the same time, it has taken a radical stance on such theological education and personal formation for authorised (lay and ordained) ministries. It has argued that those preparing for lay ministry as Readers or for ordained ministry as deacons or priests are better equipped for these ministries by working within the School for Discipleship.

This vision has been served by the design of the distinctive BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry appropriate for part-time study. This BA was validated at Glyndŵr University in its current form in 2010, building on experience gained from an earlier form validated in 2000. The initial decade of experience demonstrated that there was sufficient energy among church members in the Diocese to make the programme viable, that year-on-year new members joined the programme, that commitment to discipleship released new vocations for authorised lay and ordained ministries, and that a high quality of Readers, Deacons and Priests were being generated by the programme.

The BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry was designed with three exit points. After two years candidates can exit with the Certificate of Higher Education, after four years with the Diploma of Higher Education, and after six years with the BA degree. The Diocese required the Certificate level for admission to the office of Reader and Diploma level for admission to the order of Priest. The general practice was that, after licensing to their ministries, Readers, Deacons and Priests would wish to continue with the programme. The BA was also designed to lead seamlessly into the MA and the DMin programmes that share the commitment to developing research-based reflective practitioners.

### **Equipping disciples for the future**

The BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry developed by Glyndŵr University is highly distinctive in terms of pedagogy, curriculum, formation, assessment, and emphasis on supervised reflective practice.

*Distinctive pedagogical principles*

Each of the first four years of the programme require the completion of three modules of study. Each module occupies a nine-week term, one term before Christmas, one between Christmas and Easter, and one after Easter. The modules have been designed for delivery at a distance within the context of Local Education Groups. Local Education Groups are convened by a Facilitator and are designed to work with between six and ten participants. The Local Education Groups meet for two or three hours each week. Each module has one core text book supported by a handbook and suggestions of materials for further reading and study. The participants are asked to prepare for each meeting of the Local Education Group by reading set material and by preparing responses to set exercises.

The role of the Facilitator is not to serve as teacher for the Local Education Group, but to facilitate conversation and debate about the areas that have been considered in preparation for the meeting. Facilitation is a skilled task. Comparability between groups is maintained by a termly meeting for Facilitators.

Each module is also supported by a Saturday School. The aim of the Saturday School is threefold: to give the participants and the Facilitators for the individual groups the opportunity to meet and to share experiences and reflections; to offer input relevant to the module that can suggest perspectives independent from the perspectives adopted by the core textbooks and handbooks; and to offer advice on the assessment tasks.

The key pedagogical principles underpinning the programme value the experiences of the participants, take seriously their ordinary theological understanding (see Astley, 2002, 2003, 2007; Astley & Francis, 2013), connect theological learning and personal and professional formation, and encourage research-based reflective practice. In its initial phase, the pedagogy was supported by a series of books commissioned in the *Exploring Faith* series published by Darton, Longman and Todd, including *Living theology* by West, Noble, and

Todd (1999), *The authority of the Bible* by Strange (2000), *Communication and the gospel* by Holdsworth (2003) and *Exploring God-talk* by Astley (2004). A new series of books has been commissioned in the *Learning Church* series published by SCM Press, including *Listening to God's call* by Jones (2014), *Conversations with the New Testament* by Holdsworth (2014), and *Studying God: Doing theology* by Astley (2014).

### ***Distinctive curriculum***

The distinctive curriculum, designed to support theological learning coupled with personal, spiritual and professional formation, engages conversation between (on the one hand) the experiences and ordinary theology of the participants, and (on the other hand) the Christian tradition as valued and discussed by the church and by the academy. The curriculum takes seriously the debates of contemporary theological scholarship alongside the concerns and experiences of ordinary Christian disciples engaged with the opportunities and challenges of being actively engaged with life in the secular world and in the local congregation. The core text books have been designed to give priority to the experience and theological quest of the participants, encouraging their experience and quest to engage with the tradition. The core text books do not start with the tradition.

In order to provide a balanced basis for theological engagement, during the first four years of the programme, each year tries to engage with one module concerning scripture, one module concerning the church looking toward domestic matters (say vocation or worship), and one module concerning the church looking toward wider engagement with the world (say Christian ethics, or mission and service).

In order to consolidate the connection between theological learning and personal, spiritual and professional formation, there are no modules linked specifically to professional activities, like preaching or placements. The personal, spiritual and professional formation



aspects of the programme are core to every module and are overseen in the context of personal supervision and group activities.

### ***Distinctive formation***

The BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry has been designed to support an *accompanied journey* for disciples and for candidates for authorised ministries. Education both for discipleship and for ministry is concerned with personal, spiritual and professional formation as much as with academic learning.

The role of supervision is of particular importance for those training for authorised ministries. The theory of scholarly study and formation for ministries within Local Education Groups, alongside those following the discipleship route, ensures that lay and ordained leaders are nurtured and shaped alongside the disciples whom they are called to support and to resource. At the same time, pastoral placements throughout the whole duration of the programme ensure that the personal, spiritual and professional formation of individuals preparing for authorised ministries is nurtured alongside an experienced practitioner. One-to-one supervision by appropriately qualified staff, or directly by the Course Director, ensures that the individual candidate is embedded within the discipline of research-based reflective practice and is accountable within a firmly rooted professional structure.

The one-to-one supervision is a core feature embedded within this model of scholarly study and formation for authorised ministries. Although the programme is designed for delivery at a distance within local groups, the investment in personal, spiritual and professional formation is no less (and possibly greater) than that available within conventional seminary-based training. For churches committed to this model, it is neither an easy nor cheap option. Adequate financial and human resources are crucial to the successful implementation of the model. Also crucial in this context are appropriate training, continuing

professional development, and supervision for those individuals placed in the role of offering supervision to others.

### ***Distinctive assessment***

The BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry has been designed for a well-defined group of participants. Participation requires recommendation from and support by the local church. Individuals pursuing the discipleship route are routinely worshipping as members of a local congregation and witnessing to their faith in a local community. Individuals pursuing the ministry route have been recommended for training by the Diocese and the Province and are under the supervision of and accountable to the Diocesan Warden of Readers or the Diocesan Warden of Ordinands.

The method of assessment for the modules reflects the distinctive perspective of the participants. Each module is assessed by a portfolio of three equally weighted components. The first component is held in common with any other recognised academic award in theology. The participant is required to submit a 1,500 word essay that assesses the academic learning outcomes of the module. The second component reflects the pedagogical method of the programme. Each week the participant is required to offer a short response to the learning task reflecting the week's course material. At the end of the module the participant is required to re-visit two of these learning tasks and to develop a 750 word essay on each of them. The third component reflects the applied nature of the programme and also requires an essay of 1,500 words.

This third component reflects the overall aim of the programme that encourages dialogue between the academic learning outcomes and the personal, spiritual and professional formation of each individual. For all participants, those following the discipleship route and those training for authorised ministries, their task in the third assessment component is to reflect on the connection between the module and their personal Christian pilgrimage. For

participants training for ministries that involve preaching (lay or ordained), their task in the third assessment component may be to preach a sermon relevant to the module and to offer a critical reflection on that sermon. For participants training for pastoral ministries (lay or ordained), who throughout the module will have been on supervised placement in a parish or other ministry context, their task in the third assessment component may be to reflect on the connection between the module and their immediate placement experience.

### ***Reflective practice***

The Local Education Group provides the core environment for nurturing candidates for lay and ordained ministries, together with the principles of one-on-one supervision and pastoral placements. The theological learning and the personal, spiritual and professional formation of ministry candidates are also enhanced by a programme of activities that brings individuals together to extend the range of their experiences and to deepen their engagement with reflective practice. This can happen in a variety of ways. In the Diocese of Bangor, a core contribution was made to this collegial development of ministry candidates by a weekly seminar conducted in the Cathedral by an experienced and trained facilitator. Each week there are two key components to the Cathedral seminar.

The first component focuses on personal, spiritual and professional formation by inviting reflection and challenge on recent experiences. In particular, emphasis is placed on areas of self-understanding, critical reflection, emotional maturity, and the capacity to listen sensitively and perceptively one to another.

The second component introduces specific topics for discussion and debate, and often include expert ‘visitors’ to resource the debate. In particular, emphasis is placed on areas of theology, ethics and morality that divide rather than unite the Christian community. This aspect of the seminar was deliberately held in the public and open space of the Cathedral

Lady Chapel to symbolise the commitment of the Cathedral to this scholarly and formational process and to symbolise the public and open nature of such engagement.

Taken together, these two components help to build both a sense of personal friendship and trust and a collegial identity that forms a strong foundation for collaborative ministry shared by laity and clergy with their bishop throughout the Anglican Diocese.

### **Conclusion**

Drawing on theological, sociological and pedagogical theory, the present paper argued that the key priority for the rural church in the twenty-first century in England and Wales should reside in nurturing a robust and sustainable vision of discipleship that is both true to the gospel mandate and effective within the predominantly secular and post-Christian environment in which knowledge of Bible and church tradition cannot be assumed. This priority is true to the vision of the church founded on the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28: 19-28, consistent with the pattern of discipleship learning displayed by the Marcan account of Jesus' own ministry, and viable within the resources available to the contemporary rural church working among people who may have had little previous serious and prolonged engagement with serious theological reflection.

The initial objection raised within the Diocese of Bangor to this model of scholarly study and formation for disciples, embedding scholarly study and formation for authorised ministry, was that people would not wish to commit themselves to such a serious programme. Over a decade later that argument is no longer sustainable. People have committed themselves and others continue to do so. Along the way, the vision has been caught by the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador, and the programme has taken root in very different soil.

Other places contemplating working with a programme of this nature need to recognise, however, just how radical the approach really is. Its success or failure depends on

the skills and qualities of the people operating it. Here is a programme that explores theology in a highly distinctive way; it simply cannot be delivered by employing traditional theological pedagogies. Here is a programme that relies heavily on formational processes; it simply cannot be effective without engaging people who have themselves experienced formation and reflective practice. It is for this reason that the parallel DMin programme, designed to nurture research-based reflective practice, may be so important in the scholarly study and formation of potential leaders.

### **Note**

The BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry was designed as a degree of Glyndŵr University in Wales offered in partnership with the Faculty of Anglican Theology and Pastoral Sciences of the St Mary's and St Giles's Centre (a member of the Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion), and delivered in partnership with the St Seiriol Centre (a body accredited for training for ministries by the Ecumenical Validation Board of the Church in Wales). Currently the Church in Wales is withdrawing from this programme in order to create something new.

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